

VZCZCXYZ0004  
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0445 1801224  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 291224Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6523  
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7639  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5811  
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 5183  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0175  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3930  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0611  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0579  
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 8082  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0938  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0089  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0662  
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0042  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0693

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000445

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER  
LONDON FOR TSOU  
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/BARGHOUT  
NSA FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/28/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: POSSIBLE POLITICAL DETENTION OF 23 RELEASED  
LEBANESE CRIMINALS

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) Summary: Syria reportedly released 23 Lebanese prisoners convicted of criminal offenses, some of whom had received special presidential amnesty and the rest after finishing their prison sentences. We have been unable to verify the reports, but if true, they could represent an important development in Syrian-Lebanese relations. End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) Ammar Qurrabi, president of the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria (NOHRS), told AFP on June 23 that 23 Lebanese prisoners had been released from Syrian jails after serving convictions for drug trafficking and smuggling. He said 16 criminals were released by special amnesty, while seven had completed their jail terms. This group represented a small portion of what many human rights activists believed to be among the hundreds of Lebanese currently detained in Syrian jails. The human rights organization Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE) reported that around 100 Lebanese are held in Syrian prisoners, while Human Rights Watch (HRW) and others put that number much higher.

[13.](#) (C) Qurrabi told the Embassy on June 24 he did not know why 16 of the prisoners were given special presidential amnesty. Echoing the official Syrian stance, he denied firmly they were political prisoners, insisting several times that this "is not a human rights issue." According to HRW, those reportedly released were on a list of 107 names the Syrians sent to the Lebanese several months ago. This list was never made public. Since then, according to Qurrabi, three groups of prisoners have been released -- 16 in the first, 20 in the second, and 23 in the third and most recent.

[14.](#) (C) Qurrabi maintained the 23 released prisoners were not required to return to Lebanon, and said many remained in Syria. (Note: According to an HRW contact, a number of the released prisoners reportedly had returned to Lebanon, but none through normal border control. End note.)

[15.](#) (C) Comment: The release of common criminals in Syria is

generally unremarkable, but the release of Lebanese prisoners may represent a potentially major development in Syrian-Lebanese relations. We may never know the identities of the detainees, however. We note the inconsistency between Qurrabi's contention that the releases "are not a human rights issue" and the fact that he, a well-known human rights activist, was a major source in the regional press. Many in the diplomatic community suspect Qurrabi of having suspiciously close ties to the SARG security services. We defer to Embassy Beirut on whether there is solid Lebanese information to corroborate these reports.

CONNELLY